

Friend or Fad? Backlash Has Begun Against Gluten-Free Dieters

ELLEN McCARTHY, The Washington Post

WASHINGTON (AP) — The swelling ranks of Americans adopting gluten-free diets have given rise to another hot trend: people calling the whole thing a bunch of baloney. And then requesting that the baloney be sandwiched between two pieces of white bread. Served with a cookie for dessert.

David Klimas has a friend who recently went gluten-free, a development that the 46-year-old real estate sales manager greets with a slow eye roll. He thinks that the gluten-free thing is just a fad, promoted by food companies "as a way of making money."

"In the '50s, everyone had ulcers," he says. "Then, it was back problems. Now, it's gluten."

Gluten abstinence has grown dramatically over the past several years. According to a survey by the NPD Group, a market-research firm, nearly a third of adults say that they're trying to either eliminate or cut back on gluten, a combination of proteins found in wheat and other grains. And this movement has spawned a burgeoning food industry valued at at least \$4 billion and perhaps more than \$10 billion — and climbing.

Entire aisles at grocery stores are dedicated to the diet. Restaurant chains including Bob Evans, Hooters and, impressively, Uno Pizzeria and Grill, offer gluten-free menus. Trade shows devoted to gluten-free products have popped up nationwide. Bars use menu icons to denote gluten-free beers.

All of which makes some people want to bang their heads against a flour mill.

"I don't get it," Klimas says of his friend's decision to cut gluten from his diet. "How can you all of a sudden be gluten-free? He's 45. We've been friends for 19 years. Sometimes, I think it's just for him to be cool in front of the waiters."

"He used to eat pancakes by the dozen!" adds Klimas' husband, Kurt Rieschick, as the two sat over lunch at a downtown Chipotle. (Klimas was chowing down on a taco made with a flour tortilla. "Delicious!" he reported.)

About 1 percent of the American population suffers from celiac disease, according to the National Foundation for Celiac Awareness. This is a confounding affliction in which gluten consumption causes damage to the small intestine and interferes with the body's ability to absorb vitamins. Other people are sensitive to gluten and have negative reactions to consuming it but don't have celiac disease.

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People who have celiac disease are often misdiagnosed before the cause of their health issues — which can include digestive problems, rashes, fatigue, headaches and joint pain — is pinpointed. The only treatment for the disease is to give up gluten.

There has been a concerted effort to raise awareness of celiac disease, so that those living without a proper diagnosis can see an end to their suffering. But some people believe that the push has caused new gluten-free converts to believe that they have a disease they don't have.

"I really think he keeps reading about it and has convinced himself he's gluten-intolerant," Klimas said of his friend.

The gluten-free backlash reached an apex last month, when comedian Jimmy Kimmel remarked on his late-night show that in Los Angeles, gluten was "comparable to Satanism," and sent a film crew to ask gluten-free dieters whether they actually knew what gluten was. (Most didn't.) Talk-show host Chelsea Handler and a disgruntled Charlize Theron deconstructed the issue on-air after Handler sent gluten-free cupcakes to her friends, including Theron, for the winter holidays. "I just think that if you're going to send a gift, let it be enjoyable," fumed Theron, who said that the confection tasted "like cardboard."

Daniel Leffler, director of research at the Celiac Center at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, said that between 2 million and 3 million Americans report maintaining a gluten-free diet, and about 10 percent of that group has celiac disease. The number of people with the disease is rising — doubling every 30 years, on pace with other autoimmune diseases such as Type 1 diabetes — but the increase in that population is far outstripped by the explosive growth in people adopting the diet for other reasons, including weight loss.

This has led to what Leffler calls the gluten-free paradox: "Most people who are on the gluten-free diet don't have celiac disease, and most people who have celiac disease don't know that they have it and don't eat gluten-free."

Some nutritionists warn that dieters might be unnecessarily depriving themselves of healthy fiber found in whole grains — and not compensating with fruits, vegetables and other sources of fiber.

Jessie Dankos, a 24-year-old grant-management consultant who lives in Arlington, Virginia, felt bad for a woman she recently met at a wedding who has such a severe reaction to gluten that she has to check the labels on her shampoo to make sure that it doesn't contain traces of the substance. But Dankos has less empathy for her self-diagnosed roommate, who will sometimes gaze longingly at baked goods and expect sympathy for her inability to indulge in them. "But then sometimes she'll come home from the bars and have a slice of pizza," Dankos says.

Dankos was at the Whole Foods on P Street NW in the District with her 24-year-old co-worker, Hannah Glassman, who said that she tried eliminating gluten from her diet for a few months. Her energy level did seem to improve, Glassman said, but

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she found it awkward not to eat gluten at social events, such as happy hours, where people want to share an order of fried food. So she became less stringent and occasionally allows herself a bit of gluten. On this day, she'd chosen a pasta salad for lunch.

"I'll probably be a little tired when I go back to the office," she said. "But it's hard to tell if it's the gluten or the heat."

Shira Kraft, associate director of Hemphill Fine Arts and author of *Glutie Foodie*, a blog that tracks her culinary adventures around town, was diagnosed with celiac disease almost four years ago. She says that the gluten-free movement has been a double-edged sword for people who have the disease. On one hand, it's great to have more — and much tastier — products to choose from. But she also says that because so many people are staying gluten-free, her condition is sometimes taken less seriously.

"I certainly feel I have to defend myself," says Kraft, 31. "I'm embarrassed when I say that I'm allergic to gluten, because I feel like people are rolling their eyes. 'Just another one, part of the fad.'"

And although many restaurants are catering to gluten-free diners, some are putting limits on how far they'll go to accommodate them. Peter Pastan, owner of Etto, Obelisk and 2Amys, draws the line at gluten-free pizza. Not that people don't ask for it. They do — almost nightly.

"It's hard enough to make a good pizza," Pastan says. So he has given his servers a standard response to the gluten-free inquiries: "They say: 'You're absolutely right. I totally understand what you're saying, but my boss is crazy and there's nothing I can do about it.'"

Hanson Cheng doesn't pay much attention to the gluten-free haters. Feeling out of shape a couple of years ago, he joined a CrossFit training gym and went on the Paleo Diet, which consists of mostly meat and vegetables. When he relaxed his standards and tried eating wheat-based products again, he noticed a difference almost immediately.

"Within minutes of eating it, my stomach felt really bad and got bloated and crashed my energy. It made me feel just really bad," says Cheng, 33.

So, he has maintained his gluten-free ways and in March launched the Green Spoon, a meal-delivery service that sends gourmet gluten-free meals to the doorsteps of 30 to 40 local customers each week.

In May, the company won the best entree award at the Taste of Arlington, for a Mediterranean meatball dish.

Cheng's parents, who have long owned Chinese restaurants, are very proud. And also a little baffled.

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"They love that I'm doing well with the company," Cheng says. "But at the end of the day, they still like Chinese food. They love their gluten."

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